

'Cranhistory'

Duxbury Clipper
P. 9
1-28-2015

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Cranhistory! Is that even a word? Probably not . . . but here in Duxbury it should be.

The history of cranberries in our town is everywhere you look and wonderfully preserved by a conservation effort that began with the town's first purchase of the Feinberg and East Street bogs back in the early 1970's. Since those early purchases the town has added other bogs, including Matthews — an organic bog — O'Brien, Loring, Nudd and Round Pond and now owns over 70 acres under cultivation and management agreements. Some of these bogs contain original vines that are over 100 years old! Why should a town own cranberry bogs? The answer is to preserve this uniquely Duxbury agriculture, provide open space for citizens and jobs for growers. Cranberry bogs offer great areas for brisk walks with the opportunity to study nature. Many who might be intimidated by wooded footpaths and trails find the openness of bog hiking serene and worry free. Bogs offer panoramic views of their own special beauty that changes from season to season. Winter makes flooded bogs in the winter magnets for Duxbury ice skaters. Bogs also provide employment. The town has always attempted to find skilled growers with the right equipment to manage our bogs. If a bog is allowed to go fallow it usually reverts to a red maple swamp. Those still provide open space and trails but they are not as thrilling to see as a working bog brimming with bright red berries during a fall harvest. A good example of fallow bogs can be seen in the Thaddeus Chandler Conservation Area off Valley Street. The trails are nice, but viewing a failed agricultural endeavor is not as uplifting as an open, working bog. Some of the cranberry bogs we take for granted today have existed since the mid 1800's and are still productive. Others have fallen into disuse and reverted to wetlands with drainage ditches running through them. Almost every stream and pond in town plus the South River supplied cranberry bogs with water. Between Keene Street and Franklin Street alone are easily 25 acres of old dike systems for long gone bogs that once produced hundreds of bushels* of cranberries. In one forgotten bog system all that's left are 10 feet high dikes overgrown with trees, vines and shrubs. Wooden flumes have rotted away but the hand dug ditches still run with the water they once controlled. Other bogs have given way to marshes where redwing blackbirds serenade from their perches atop bobbing cattails. Many of us daily drive past the very first bog built in Duxbury. It is named after its creator, Stephen Gifford, and is on the northwest corner of Temple and Church Streets. Beginning in 1845 this industrious man began draining a swamp, cutting brush and trees, pulling stumps and roots with the help of ox teams, leveling the land, spreading sand and lovingly planting hundreds of cranberry vines by hand. By the late fall of 1846 he was pulling boards from his flumes and flooding his bogs for the first time to protect the new young vines from the cold winter freezes to come. It was a yearly cycle that continues to this day.

Cranberries were first discovered in America on Cape Cod and it is thought their name derived from the words 'crane' and 'berry,' because the vine's blossoms resemble a crane's head. The American species was first cultivated in England by the botanist Sir Joseph Banks, who lived from 1743 until 1820 and obtained his vines from Cape Cod. The earliest plantings of his cultivars in America were made on Cape Cod sometime between 1800 and 1818 and it is rumored that this occurred because of an accident of fate. Henry Hall of North Dennis was the owner of land that included a large boggy area of the wild cranberries, which often grew in back of sand dunes. He and many other early settlers gathered the tasty berries for eating even though the wild vines did not produce much fruit. In 1816 a savage storm with huge high tides breached the dunes near his berries and the receding salt water left a layer of sand atop his vines. To his astonishment and delight, his next year's crop was extraordinary. He quickly learned by experimenting how to build, plant and manage better bogs and the cranberry industry in America was born.

When Stephen Gifford began growing cranberries in Duxbury in 1845 it would take a crew of from fifteen to twenty men a week or more to plant vines on two or three acres of prepared bogs. Since that time machines have been created that allow two men to do the same amount of work in just a day. The harvesting of berries has undergone equal timesavings. One man with a beater on a flooded bog can float the berries from an acre of bog in about a day. Prior to that it would take a crew of fifteen to dry pick that acre in two days. Beaters were invented around 1920. The very first version was made by a man named Gordon Griswold just after World War I. He attached an airplane engine to a flatbottomed boat and the twirling propeller stirred the vines enough to loosen the berries. The berries then floated to the surface where they could be gathered easily. Modern beaters are more efficient but Mr. Griswold must have been a hero to dry pickers!

No story of cranberries in Duxbury would be complete without mentioning the Consolidated Cape Cod Cranberry Company (CCCC). Early in the 1900's that Corporation owned 760 acres of land in Duxbury of which 126 acres were planted to cranberries. Their holdings also included 300 acres of rough swamp, which their first investment prospectus stated could be 'admirably adapted to cranberry culture'. Their prospectus went on to say, 'When fully developed the Company will own about 425 acres of producing cranberry bog of the first quality, with abundant water supply and perfect drainage'. The South River ran through part of their property, which also contained three large ponds or reservoirs, two at the upper end, one of 40 acres and the second of 25 acres, and the third one, a 25 acre pond, at the lower end of the property. The Keene Up and Down Sawmill, the bones of which can still be seen at the corner of Temple and Keene Streets, supplied the CCCC with wooden boxes for crating its cranberries.

But, like many grand schemes, Consolidated Cape Cod Cranberry Company is no more. In the 1960's, as Route 3 came marching south through Duxbury, CCCC exited forever and much of what it owned is now looked after by Duxbury's Conservation Commission.

The cranberry business as a whole is not easy; crop prices fluctuate, equipment is expensive to maintain and growing cranberries requires intense physical work, often in nasty weather. By owning bogs and implementing management agreements with farmers, the Duxbury Conservation Commission helps guarantee the perpetuation of our town's rich agricultural heritage as well as protecting open space. And the icing on the cake? The bogs offer some of the best hiking in town.

**It should be noted that years ago, harvested cranberry fruit was measured in bushels; today the measurement is barrels, with a barrel of cranberries weighing 100 lbs.*

1 of 2



One of the neatest bogs in Duxbury, O'Brien Bog off Mayflower Street on the White and Yellow trails.

Photo by Holly Morris



Conservation Conversation

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2 of 2